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ABSTRACT

Observing that the lecture/discussion instructional technique resulted in high failure rates among students taking technical composition, an instructor at Madisonville Community College (Kentucky) implemented a new course system designed to provide individualized instruction. The system called for two fifty-minute lectures per week attended by all students and several fifty-minute workshops each limited to an enrollment of seven students. Though students spent the same amount of time in class as they did in the traditional lecture course, teacher class time differed slightly depending on the number of students enrolled. During the workshops, students received individualized help with specific writing problems, wrote final drafts for writing assignments explained during the lecture, and took exams at an individualized pace. Preliminary implementation suggested that the course design was successful. Of the 31 students enrolled during the first semester, five withdrew and only two failed. (JP)

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# UTILIZING WORKSHOPS IN TECHNICAL COMPOSITION

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UTILIZING WORKSHOPS IN TECHNICAL COMPOSITION

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Madisonville Community College offers its technical students the option of a two semester technical composition course in place of the traditional six hours of freshman composition. These students typically have a high interest/high ability in technical skills and a low interest/low ability in language skills. According to test results on the California Adult Basic Education Exam, a diagnostic tool administered by the learning lab at MCC, the mean score of students enrolled in technical composition over five semesters in English mechanics is ninth grade fifth month. (The CABE is designed to test only the student's skill in mechanics: capitalizing, punctuating, using words correctly, and spelling. It is used in conjunction with two writing samples - one home, one in-class - to help initially diagnose a student's needs.)

## SUCCESS OF LECTURE/DISCUSSION METHOD

When using a fairly traditional method of instruction (basically lecture/discussion with occasional workshops during lecture sessions where students would work in small groups on prewriting tasks), there was very little hope of giving the students the individual attention that was needed. This was

obvious in the number of withdrawals and failures. In the fall of 1976 (the last semester the traditional system was used), fifty-four students were enrolled in the first semester of technical writing. Thirteen of these withdrew on the advice of the instructor; fourteen students refused to withdraw and subsequently failed the course. Half of the class could not do the work required.

There seemed to me, as the sole instructor of the course, to be several options. One, I could admit that I was incompetent. This option I immediately rejected. Two, I could admit that the students were incapable of learning to write technical reports with a minimum of errors. I must admist that I considered the possibility for a while before I rejected it also. Three, I could develop a method of teaching the course which would give me individual time with the students and yet also give me the opportunity to explain the assignment to large groups, i.e., lecture. This was the option I decided to use.

## COURSE DESIGN

The system I devised calls for two fifty-minute lectures per week which are attended by all students enrolled in the course and several fifty-minute workshops each limited to an enrollment of seven students. Each student must attend one of the workshops each week. This allows for the needed time to

present information about the course as well as time to work on the specific writing problems of the individual and to cover exercises designed to help eliminate the particular usage errors made by the student.

AMOUNT OF CLASSTIME SPENT

Under this system of scheduling, students spend the same amount of time in class. A computation comparing the amount of time spent in class by the instructor under the workshop system with the time spent in class under the traditional system shows their class time is roughly equivalent - varying no more than fifty minutes in any given semester. The following chart illustrates this point. Enrollment figures used are typical at our school and were taken from registration figures for the given semester.

| | WORKSHOP METHOD | LECTURE METHOD |
|---|---|---|
| Spring 1976<br>19 students | 100 min. Lecture.<br>150 min. Three Workshops<br>250 min. Class Time | 300 min. Class Time |
| Fall 1976<br>32 students | 100 min. Lecture<br>250 min. Five Workshops<br>350 min. Class Time | 300 min. Class Time |
| Spring 1977<br>13 students | 100 min. Lecture<br>100 min. Two Workshops<br>200 min. Class Time | 150 min. Class Time |

| | WORKSHOP METHOD | LECTURE METHOD |
|---|---|---|
| Fall 1977<br>50 students | 100 min. Lecture<br>350 min. Seven Workshops<br>450 min. Class Time | 450 min. Class Time |

The instructor's course load is determined by the number of students registered for the lecture periods. We have used the rough figure of 22 students to equate one class; therefore, if 40 students register for technical writing, the instructor is credited with 6 hours or two classes.

WORKSHOP DESIGN

The workshop is designed so that the student may receive individualized help with specific writing problems and with the writing assignments explained during lecture. It is also an opportunity for the student to review or become aware of standard American usage by working in an individualized pace through the text The Least You Should Know About English: Basic Writing Skills by Teresa Glazier. This text is used in conjunction with the primary course text, Occupational English by Laster and Pickett.

A grade is given for the workshop and is based on the quality of the work, the amount of improvement shown, and the attitude of the student. Exams are given over The Least You Should Know About English on an individualized basis. A student may re-take tests on any section as often as he pleases, with the score of the last exam being the only grade recorded.

However, the text and all tests must be completed by the last week of the workshop. Writing assignments assigned in lecture are due in rough form in the lab for discussion before the turn-in dates. Discussions of the rough drafts vary in form from individual consulation to small group discussion. The only grade assigned to rough drafts is either complete or not completed, and these grades do affect the overall workshop grade.

SUCCESS IN METHOD

Although this course design is still relatively new, I believe it is successful. Last fall 31 students enrolled in the first semester of technical writing; of this group, only two students failed the course and one of these simply stopped attending without going through drop/add procedure. Five students withdrew from the course; two of these withdrew from school; only one withdrew failing.

Perhaps as important as these statistics, if not more in some ways, is the change in the attitude about the course. The students respond better in class and seem to feel that as an instructor I care about their learning the material rather than feeling that I am merely throwing information at them. It is true that technical writing is not most of my student's favorite course, but at least they now see it as a valuable and necessary learning experience.

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